



MY FRIEND JI KWANG

IN A RELATIVELY SMALL SPACE, CATALONIA OFFERS EXAMPLES OF PRACTICALLY ALL THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF LANDSCAPE TO BE FOUND IN EUROPE.

OLEGUER SARSANEDES JOURNALIST

My friend Ji Kwang said to me one day, "What is there to see in your country?"

Ji Kwang is Korean; from Seul.

"Well", I said to her, slightly taken aback, "I don't know, all sorts of things... For example, in Barcelona—"

"No, no", she interrupted, "*apart* from Barcelona."

She often visits Barcelona and knows the city fairly well. But she's never been outside it. Which is exactly what happens to most travellers nowadays: they jump from one city to another, by plane, and they don't often have a chance to get to know the less cosmopolitan side of the country, away from the cities.

"You mean in Catalonia?" I said, playing for time and trying to get my ideas straight.

She knows enough about Catalonia to realize that we live in a country with a capital, a very important capital, but that there's a lot more to the country than just that. She corrected me.

"Yes, in Catalonia, but not including Barcelona."

It was like a challenge, and I like challenges.

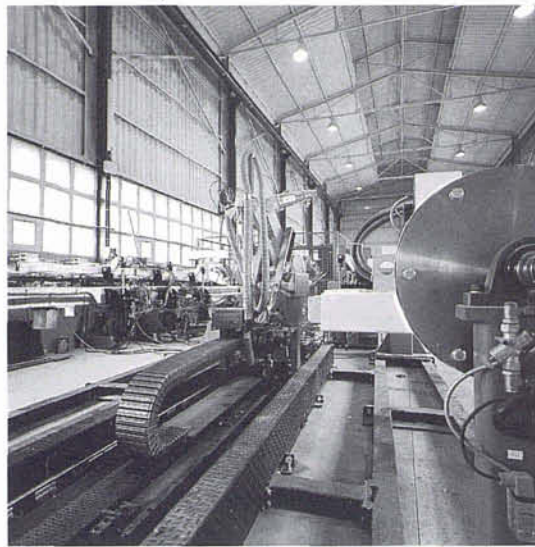
"Well", I said, "to start with, there are all the different types of landscape."

Because, as the French geographer Pierre Deffontaines—who devoted years of detailed study to our country—pointed out,

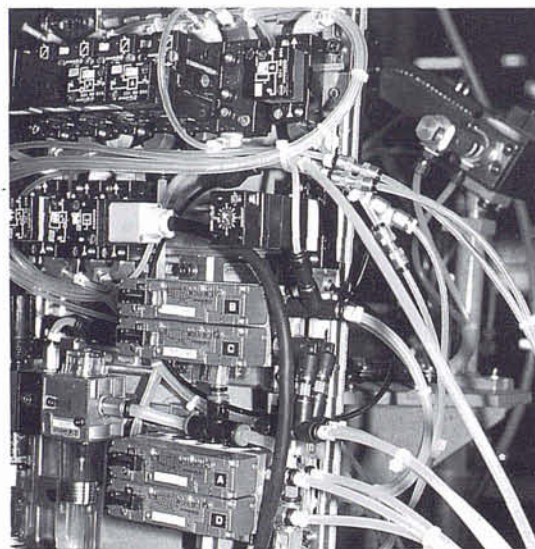
in a relatively small space, Catalonia offers examples of practically all the different types of landscape to be found in Europe. The steamy mountains, with their endless canopy of beechwoods, are only a few hours away from the sea and the sun; the snowy peaks, from the ricefields and orchards; the misty plains, from the rocks whipped by the dry *tramuntana*; the forests of fir, from the olive groves.

From the point of view of the geology, the climate, the flora, Catalonia, with its sometimes dramatic contrasts, is like a synthesis of different countries.

"And nowhere is this synthesis more obvious than in the case of Montseny, a mountain which offers a complete se-



© ELOI BONJOCH



© ELOI BONJOCH

lection of all the flora of Europe, from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean. Or else there's Montserrat, the extraordinary sacred mountain. And the Pyrenees, of course, which, with their rocky buttresses, account for almost a third of the whole country." And that's another thing; in spite of the mile upon mile of coastline, in spite of the fact that it's largely due to its beaches that Catalonia has become Europe's most important tourist area, in spite of the world-famous Costa Brava, Maresme and Costa Daurada, Catalonia belongs to the mountains more than to the sea. Seventy-five per cent of the country is mountainous land; the average height is 700 metres above sea level.

"And what's more, its history has its roots in the mountains: the people who conquered or reconquered these lands from the Saracens, who named them and shaped them, gave the country laws and government as the last, the southernmost bastion of the Carolingian Empire, just over a thousand years ago, in fact set out from the mountains, their refuge and fortress —and also the place where the Catalans' characteristic coarseness is said to have been forged." Mountain folk rather than sailors, continental rather than Mediterranean, the Catalans may well be a rugged people, or maybe simply more serious than their neighbours; in any case, they are certainly

the least Latin of the Latins. And if the mountains are the origin of their history as a people, it is only to be expected that there we should find most remains of their early works.

"Romanesque art: Sant Pere de Roda, Cuixà, Ripoll, Taüll..."

The work of the first Catalans: one of Catalonia's most important contributions to world history.

"And what happened then?" asked Ji Kwang.

"Then there was the move down from the mountains towards the plain and the sea. And later, the growth of the cities."

Today, seven of every ten Catalans live in cities.





© ELOI BONJOCH

"If it weren't for the distortion arising as a result of the Barcelona conurbation, Catalonia today would probably be a country of cities, like Germany or Italy."

The cities: the majority, the most important, tend to have Roman origins; after the Reconquest, they became county capitals, their walls were rebuilt and they were given a castle and a church or cathedral, usually at the highest point.

"In Old Catalonia, the noble Girona, a city astride a river: on the left bank, the new part of the city; on the right bank, one of the most important concentrations of historic buildings in the country. In New Catalonia, Tarragona, the imperial Roman metropolis, set on a hill overlooking the sea. And Lleida

and Tortosa, ancient capitals of Saracen kingdoms; the first by the Segre, the second by the Ebro; both of them centres of extensive, rich agricultural regions..."

Later, other cities developed; cities that had started to grow around a market.

"Vic, a city with its own particular charm, a powerful episcopal see, capital of the plain..."

In the eighteenth century, the growth of trade gave rise to the so-called 'new towns'.

"Mataró, Reus, Igualada... but if the choice were mine, I'd take you to Vilanova i la Geltrú, even if only to spend a little time wandering along the Rambla and the Marina..."

And finally, in the mid-nineteenth century,

industrialization: whole districts suddenly arising from nowhere, under the shadow of a factory: Sabadell, Badalona, Terrassa, l'Hospitalet...

"But the person who could tell you much more about these and many other things than I can is, of course, a writer whose work is an extremely accurate and perceptive description of this land and its inhabitants: Josep Pla."

Well, that's life for you: as Pla hasn't been translated into Korean yet, Ji Kwang has started to study Catalan.

Because, of course, it's quite obvious that if you want to get to know a country, there's nothing like learning the language. ●